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A Hero's Sister-in-Law

Reader, Meet Coral Cloud, an Actress Person Who Helps
Our Heroine to Bring to Life a Birds' Egg Collector

WHEN H. G. Wells invented the three little periods in a row he did a great thing for the cause of Literature; he enabled the novelist to indicate Thought. The oldtimers who tried their hand at the writing game were in no such luck. If one of their characters did some thinking there was nothing to do but to set down in words just what the thoughts were. And there are so many Thoughts—the kind that take the capital T—which can't be set down in words . . . Especially in these inconsecutive times . . .

As one of Mr. Wells's contemporaries Clemence Dane has cheerfully mastered the knack of the triple dot. In her new novel, *First The Blade*, she uses it with a dexterity that may make Mr. Wells gently envious. Whenever Laura Valentine had a spell of thinking the lower right hand key of the author's typewriter worked overtime.

"Not natural," "like an actress." . . . Oh, it wasn't fair of Justin . . . wasn't fair not to give her time to get used to him again. . . . He'd been grown up so much longer, but didn't he remember what it felt like to be shy and awkward and uncertain? . . . How could one cover it up but by being glib? . . . At Paris they liked her. . . . Mrs. Cloud liked her. . . . Mrs. Cloud had liked her green dress. . . . She didn't know what he meant. . . . It wasn't vanity, everybody waved their hair. . . . She couldn't help her voice being loud. . . . She had never realized that she was so full of faults. . . . She had only wanted to make herself nice—and now it was all wrong. . . . And after looking forward so to Italy. . . . Not that she cared. . . . not that she cared a hang! . . .

The Poor Old Boob.

Justin Cloud was a poor old jabberwock when it came to behaving tactfully to a nice girl who adored him. Right away on seeing her for the first time in a dog's age he had to tell her that her clothes were rather bright and her hair fussed out like an actress's. And that he hated scent and chatter and high heels and things that jingled. If Laura had been like some girls she would have told him something. But Laura was a nice girl. She managed a smile and then turned her back while she dabbed with her handkerchief and thought the highly punctuated sentiments that we have transcribed.

If Justin—somebody please suppress the person who echoes every mention of Our Hero's name with the query, "What for?"—if Justin had been a regular guy and not an absent-minded beggar who collected birds' eggs when he should have been collecting his wits he would have shaken hands with Laura Valentine with real heartiness and cried: "H'lo, Laura; how's all the folks? And how's Laurie?" And Laura would have been in a state of ecstatic happiness and Clemence Dane would have had no story to tell.

Even John, Justin's wayward brother, could have managed to be more decent. John was a person Justin declared he could never forgive. But at that time Justin could never have forgiven any one who wasn't like Henry Justin Cloud. Decidedly, John wasn't. He went to America at an

early age. He never wrote home. Ourselves, we fancy it was because his arm got tired of writing these English addresses. At any rate no letters came carefully directed to Mrs. Cloud, The Lodge, Brackenhurst, Bayswater, Houndsditch, Wapping Old Stairs, Hants. Nothing came until John died, and then his wife—my dear, he married an actress person—consented to be led to Brackenhurst, where she immediately assumed the stellar role for which professional experience had qualified her. If she had never been a star before she became one now.

This Coral Cloud, wife of the never-mention-his-name-to-me-again John, is the one person in *First The Blade* you really warm up to. When Laura told her that she and Justin were engaged Coral knew right away that something was wrong and said so. She remarked:

"You don't behave as if you were. When I think of me and Johnnie, let alone my best boys—goodness me!"

Some Girl, This Coral!

Which is what you might call a fairly expressive ejaculation. Coral had an idea of how an engaged couple should act. It did not include the girl going without a ring because her fiance could never think to get her one. It did not include a passion for collecting birds' eggs. "Aren't men quaint?" observed Coral to Laura. "I had a lot of trouble before I cured Johnnie."

Coral was a clear-visioned sort. She spoke without affectation of a second marriage and other matters.

"Fifty? Forty? I tell you—I'll tell you—I'm thirty. That's what I am. Not a day more. And Tim was accidental. Quite. If I'd had my way—Of course a child takes it out of you—and touring on the top! I played Aladdin at the time I was nursing him. It wasn't as easy as you'd think, either. My word, how that kid used to howl!

My dressing room was star, you see—right off the stage. We used to arrange with the conductor for incidental music whenever he woke up. Can't trust landladies—will give 'em gin when back's turned. Well, as I say—I may be thirty and there's Tim and the mourning; but made up I don't look a day over twenty. I give you my word. Why shouldn't I get married again?"

Laura fidgeted, but whether because she found the question difficult to answer or whether from a desire to laugh at the arrangement for incidental music or whether with horror at landladies who would give the baby gin is not disclosed. The author points out that Coral "had a terrible trick of accusing you of thinking that which, as a matter of inconvenient fact, you had been thinking." Coral was the bird to deal with Justin.

It's a Hard Life.

Coral knew all about Men. Laura noticed a three-cornered scar on the actress's shoulder where a chair leg had landed. "Johnnie did that," explained Coral. "Poor Johnnie! How upset he was next day!" To little Laura listening round-eyed and exclaiming: "But—but—he was a gentleman!" Coral answered: "A gentleman's just a man when he's drunk, same as most other times—swears the same and smells the same." The reader's conviction deepens that Coral is the reef on which Justin is going to scrape bottom.

But fortunately for Justin his sister-in-law was for getting back on the stage. Mrs. Cloud and Aunt Adela and Gran'papa were practically nothing to her. The only thing that really stirred Coral to her depths was the knowledge that Justin was acquainted with one Wilbraham, a theatrical magnate. Justin could give her an introduction to Willy and Willy could give her a swell part.

Well, if you had been Justin would you have given your sister-in-law a letter to Willy? You would? You would not!

Good night! Justin never knew that a certain Oliver—we forget whether his last name was Osborne—had actually kissed Laura. Justin never knew the crashing revenge which Coral inflicted upon him by giving Laura a hot tip on how to wake him up. What Justin never knew would fill a book, in fact does fill 317 pages. And what Justin didn't know the reader can find out, including the terrible thing that happens in Chapter 29. This dreadful deed made Justin swear and Laura was ill in bed with a "where-am-I" illness for days or weeks afterward. When she got a peek at a newspaper England was at war and Justin was getting out in the world.

First The Blade will have the most diverse receptions by readers. The chatty passages with which it opens will set some teeth on edge and the "intimate" style will seem to these readers carefully rehearsed, consciously labored and intolerable all the way through. But others will think quite differently. We can hear them exclaiming: "Isn't *First The Blade* simply delightful! And isn't Laura a dear!" They will be absolutely right for themselves and thousands like them.

FIRST THE BLADE. By CLEMENCE DANE. The Macmillan Company. \$1.50.

